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## HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

### MASTER PLAN REVIEW

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Property Address:	<b>North Capitol/Michigan Avenue, NW</b>	<b>X</b>	Agenda
Landmark/District:	<b>McMillan Reservoir</b>		Consent Calendar
		<b>X</b>	Conceptual Review
Meeting Date:	<b>June 27, 2013</b>	<b>X</b>	Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	<b>Steve Callcott</b>	<b>X</b>	New Construction
		<b>X</b>	Demolition

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Vision McMillan Partners (VMP) seeks conceptual review for four development projects at the McMillan Park Reservoir sand filtration site. In its previous presentations, VMP has presented the master plan framework for the organization of the site, with various revisions and refinements made in response to comments from the Board and community, and resulting from the changes required to accommodate the DC Water storm water management project. The current concepts focus on four of the five redevelopment projects proposed for the property within that framework.

The individual projects submitted, listed from south to north, include: 1) the community center and park designed by Matthew Bell of EE & K/Perkins Eastman and Warren Byrd of Nelson Byrd Woltz landscape architects; 2) 161 rowhouses designed by Jack McLaurin of Lessard Group architects for developer/builder EYA; 3) a mixed-use building with a ground-level grocery store with apartments above designed by MV + A and David Jameson Architects for Jair Lynch Development Partners; and 4) two medical office buildings with ground level retail designed by Shalom Baranes architects for the Trammell Crow Company. The fifth site, to the west of the grocery store/apartment building, includes one of the below-grade cells that will be used for storm water retention until the First Street tunnel is completed and is not being planned for redevelopment at this time.

#### **Master Plan Review**

In its last review of the master plan in April, the Board expressed its appreciation for the substantial efforts of the VMP team and the community in working to improve the proposal, and found the revised plan to be an improvement over the previous submission, particularly with retaining the raised berm/plinth condition at the south end of the site. The Board encouraged that the original tripartite organization of the site, defined by the east-west maintenance corridors, be strengthened by minimizing new secondary roads and encouraging a more cohesive site plan in the middle section. The Board continued to question the external orientation of the buildings and garden in the northern portion of the site, and the effect the new construction will have on the north maintenance corridor. While appreciative of the larger public park and preservation of open space in the southern portion, it was suggested that the plans for the park itself should be developed to maintain a strong sense of the site's open quality. As well, it was noted that the larger park had resulted in the new construction "ballooning out" elsewhere on the site, resulting in losing the perimeter Olmsted Walk along the east side of the site, which was felt to be an important element to retain and to unify the

disparate new construction projects. To justify the extent of demolition and to ensure that a strong sense of place be retained, the Board expressed its view that the quality of new construction should be extremely high, and that the guidelines for new construction were perhaps not strong enough to ensure the necessary unity and cohesiveness among the various new buildings.

In filing conceptual designs for the buildings, the applicants are hoping to illustrate how the site might actually be experienced when built out. As well, evaluating qualities such as design excellence, unity and cohesiveness can only be judged through the review of conceptual building designs. Some of the Board's recommendations regarding further revisions to the site plan have been responded to and are incorporated into the conceptual development plans.

## **Proposals**

### *Community center and park*

This project calls for construction of a 17,500 square foot community center with a swimming pool, community multipurpose room, art/history exhibit gallery, fitness studio, and locker room/shower facilities. The two-level building would be accessed at the upper level from the south maintenance corridor and open to both the upper grass terrace level and the lower water park level of the park; it would also provide a view into one of the preserved below-grade cells. Architecturally, the building is illustrated as a clean lined, rectilinear glass pavilion with strong vertical proportions. Bridging the change in elevation between the upper and lower park, it would be partially submerged on the west side while on the east and south it would have an abstracted classical porch with attenuated columns supporting an overhanging sunscreen. The roof would replicate the diagonal patterning of the site's manhole covers within a green roof.

As previously presented, the park would occupy the entire southern third of the site and include the south maintenance corridor and its above-grade structures. The raised berm and topographical plinth would be retained, the Olmsted Walk recreated around the perimeter, and one of the below-grade cells retained adjacent to the community center. The eastern edge of the site along North Capitol Street would be selectively cut away and dropped to grade to allow universal access and improve sight-lines into the park; the at-grade entrance to the park would include an open arcade using retained or recreated portions of the cell walls. The lower terraced area would feature a garden with a naturalized pond and perhaps other water features. The upper terrace area would be largely devoted to an open lawn (to allow for informal play but not laid out as a playing field) and a grove of trees planted in a diagonal pattern referencing the manhole covers. The south maintenance corridor, including its filter bed portals, sand bins, and regulator houses, would be retained; a portion of the corridor would have shared pedestrian and vehicular access (from First Street) to provide limited parking and access to the park.

### *Rowhouses*

This project calls for construction of 161 rowhouses within the central third of the site. The complex would have several different slightly different house types, ranging in width from 14 to 19 feet; in depth, they would be either 35 or 49 feet deep. The houses would be four-stories in height, with the first floor essentially at grade, and contain a garage within the body of the house accessed from a rear alley. The fourth floor of each unit would be set back from the facade and open to a roof terrace. The street-facing elevations of the houses have been designed to have slight variations within a limited palate and color range. The primary masonry block of all

houses would be red brick, the projecting bays and oriels (which vary in height and placement on the facades) would be clad in either Hardie panel (cement board) or ground face block in a taupe or charcoal color, and the fourth floors would be clad in Hardie panel in taupe or charcoal.

In response to the Board's comments in April, the site plan has been modified to eliminate one of the two new east-west streets through the site. To improve sight lines to the south maintenance corridor and park, two additional north-south streets have been introduced.

#### *Grocery store/apartment building*

This project includes a ground-level grocery store with five levels of apartments above and two levels of parking below grade. The base would be roughly 20 feet in height; the apartment towers would rise to a height of about 75 feet. The rectangular base of the building would fill out the site, expressed as a thick gabion wall using reclaimed concrete from the site's demolished cells. The apartment towers above would be laid out in a double X form, referencing the diagonal patterning of manhole covers on the site, and would be clad in a panel system that evokes water punctuated with irregularly shaped and spaced windows. The pedestrian entrance to the grocery store be accessed from the north maintenance corridor; at-grade loading and the parking garage entrance, as well as several group-level apartment units, would face the new east-west road on the building's south elevation.

#### *Medical office buildings*

This project includes two L-shaped office buildings in the north third of the site, organized around a "healing garden" facing Michigan Avenue and flanking the new Half Street running north-south through the property. The buildings would have ground-level retail opening to the north maintenance corridor and house medical office facilities above. The buildings would step up in height from 84 feet on the east facing the retained cell 14 on North Capitol Street, to 110 feet at Half Street, to 130 feet on First Street. Access to below grade parking and loading would be accessed from a U-shaped driveway through the healing garden.

The massing of each building would be broken down into intersecting geometric forms sitting on a glazed retail base. The geometric forms within each building would be clad in a variety of materials (terra cotta, metal panels), colors, and fenestration patterns to provide visual interest; the storefronts would consist of folded glass planes.

### **Evaluation**

In reviewing the master plan, the Board has struggled with the most basic challenge posed by this project – how to meaningfully preserve the civic-oriented, City Beautiful era industrial landscape character of the property when it is being proposed for extensive demolition and redevelopment. One of the primary recommendations given at the previous review was that the new buildings should be of a very high quality and be unified in some clear way, and that they should be distinct to and reflective of the site, so that the property would continue to convey some sense of its historical character.

The architectural guidelines provided a starting point for achieving that goal, citing a range of materials, colors, window/wall ratios, and other characteristics that the projects should adhere to. However, there were concerns expressed by the Board that the guidelines didn't go far enough in ensuring the desired cohesion. Those concerns have proven to be well founded.

While each of the projects arguably meet some (if not all) of the suggested guidelines, they don't really coalesce in any legible way to form a unified whole. Instead, they read as a large, ambitious and handsomely designed public park and recreation center (which is successful in retaining and interpreting the character of the site), and three private development projects, each with distinctly different building types, sizes, uses, and architectural expressions. The projects don't seem to stem from any common principles or conceptual ideas of how to approach the site or how to relate to each other to form a greater whole that retains, evokes or interprets the specific character of McMillan.

In evaluating McMillan against other collections of buildings that have an obvious unity, it becomes clear why the challenge is a difficult one. McMillan isn't proposed to have the common programmatic use that brings cohesiveness to a college or institutional campus, it doesn't have the common building type, size or exacting architectural standards of civic complexes like the Federal Triangle, nor does it have the monumental open space, prescribed height limits and setbacks that bring unity to the variety of buildings that make up the National Mall.

Nevertheless, despite their differences, further efforts are needed to bring these projects together. Fortunately, there are inklings of ideas that run through the projects that might provide the genesis for how the projects might be more unified. For instance, in various ways both literal and abstract, the park, the recreation center and the grocery/ apartment building designs propose to evoke the pattern of manhole covers that dot the site. Set at an angle to the orthogonal geometry of surrounding blocks, the broader application of this distinct pattern could both internally unify and differentiate from the surrounding city. As another example, the grocery store/apartment and medical office buildings purport (it is difficult to tell from the drawings) to have a common datum line at roughly 20 feet facing the north maintenance corridor. While the bases are treated too differently for this commonality to be discernible, establishing a "base zone" that has stronger unifying characteristics might also be worthy of consideration. A more carefully prescribed palate of materials and colors might also be evaluated. It is not being suggested that these should be the specific unifying characteristics; rather, they are used to illustrate that it may be necessary for the team to establish a few more specific principles in order for the individual projects to come together to form a distinct and unified composition.

As the projects continue to be conceptually developed, the HPO also recommends consideration of the following as it relates to the specific projects:

**Recreation Center:** While perhaps unavoidable, the mechanical penthouse structure on top of this green roofed temple detracts from the simplicity of the form and the strong visual idea that the original ground plane has simply been elevated up to accommodate the new building underneath. It should be explored whether it can be reduced or eliminated.

**Townhouses:** While the townhouses are the lowest in height and smallest in scale, in some respects this makes them the hardest to relate to the large scale of the site. With narrow individual dimensions and a variety of bay heights, façades treatments, and materials, the cumulative effect is visually busy for a site that is characterized by its broad sweep and simplicity. Further simplification of the forms and grouping the units to read as part of a larger

scaled composition should be further studied. While it is not suggested that the architecture be replicated, Georgian and Victorian terrace houses in Bath and London provide examples of how individual houses can be grouped into larger compositions, with the individual human-scaled components coalescing into larger civic-scaled frontages. As part of that exercise, it is recommended that the partial fourth floors be more fully integrated into the composition of the underlying buildings.

**Grocery store/apartment building:** This is certainly the most conceptually and materially interesting of the proposed projects, with reclaimed materials for the building base reused to evoke the lost cells and a bold geometry and unusual material finish for the building above. The challenge for this particularly unusual and powerful building will be how it relates to the larger composition.

**Medical office buildings:** The Board has repeatedly raised concerns about the site plan for these buildings, with the north-facing entrance court and healing garden and the bulk of the new construction set at the edge of the north maintenance corridor. The master planning team feels strongly that the north entrance court is important both in providing for vehicular access to the buildings (thus keeping it off the north maintenance corridor) and in serving as an important cross-town transit hub for a future streetcar line. It should be noted that the buildings aren't set flush with the maintenance corridor, but employ canted setbacks to break down the mass into smaller geometric units. This should be further developed and modeled to better illustrate the effect of the mass on the maintenance corridor. In doing so, it may be beneficial to increase the setbacks and further exaggerate the geometries both to help pull some of the mass away from the corridor and to provide additional sculptural relief that could relate to the grocery/apartment building. As well, and despite recent revisions to the buildings' bases facing the north maintenance court, it is unclear how the base of this building will have any commonality to the base of the grocery store that forms the other side of the corridor. The bases of both buildings should be studied and illustrated together.

## **Recommendation**

*The HPO recommends that the Board:*

- *Find that the proposed concepts do not yet achieve the design cohesion necessary to maintain a specific sense of place evocative of and unique to the McMillan site.*
- *Suggest that rather than working under the broad perimeters of the architectural cohesion guidelines, that the teams work together to develop a few strong principles that achieve a clearer sense of unity among the projects.*